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# Seasons, Fields, Dreams

Artists and the landscape

## Modern Painters

Summer 2001

In Josh Dorman's recent show at 55 Mercer Gallery was a small, untitled ink drawing of a tree flying over a landscape. The drawing is almost childlike, and weird enough to remind us of the drawings of the insane. The tree's branches appear to flail and to lift like a bird's head in the wind, as its roots dangle, tail-like, trailing clumps of earth.

Never, while viewing this work, was I reminded of hurricane winds or other forces of nature or man that might have flung the tree skyward. Nor was I to believe that I was viewing a fairy-tale world where trees uproot themselves and take to the heavens. Dorman's forms are both more fantastical and less literal. The tree is neither itself nor a bird, and the sky in his drawing is no more above than the earth is below. If this begins to sound like a riddle, well, maybe that is what Dorman intends. In his landscape paintings



Josh Dorman, *Red Hill*, 2001, oil on wood, 35.6 x 30.5 cm

and drawings, he does not seem to have created a world where trees fly, but, instead, a world where trees are never really trees at all, and if, for moments, they are, they could just as easily have taken root in the sky.

In Dorman's artist's statement for this show, he describes his childhood drawings as 'strange contraptions, moving out from and into each other in a circular pattern ... gizmo-piece[s] (picture cake batter pouring from a blender into a buzzing electric socket)', and associates them with a recent adult experience of his at a Thai restaurant. Just before he began his meal, a 'wriggling thumb-sized creature - a sort of pale grey, plump sea millipede', crawled from the mouth of his whole deep fried Red Snapper. 'What joy!' Dorman writes, 'How often do our dream images enter into our daily waking lives and truly startle us?'

Out of such experiences, and the discovery of Ernst Haeckel's *Art Forms in Nature*, Dorman began to draw again, very much in the way he had when he was eight years old. He included a number of these small, sparse ink drawings, painted on antique ledger paper, in the show. They are miniature worlds, a mixture of botanical or zoological studies and Dr Suess-like doodles. Sea life, clouds, animals, figures, smouldering cities and winged plants interact and interchange with each other. At their best, the drawings are enigmatic and resemble swirling energies more than recognisable forms.

These drawings appear to have freed up Dorman's imagination, while the colour in his larger oil paintings of invented land/dreamscapes has become much richer. Dorman's new work moves beyond the illustration of romantic ideas, as each painting finds, and is carried by, its own colour range and captivating mood. Dorman appears to be nurturing the particular quality of autumnal gestation in each of these strange, abstract landscapes, which are as much Elysian fields as they are dark, unconscious wanderings.

'Although I am in my studio in the mountains,' writes Joan Snyder, about the origin of her new series of abstract paintings, entitled 'Primary Fields', 'I am dreaming



Stanley Lewis, *Tree from John's Room*, 2001, pencil on paper, 120.7 x 130.8 cm